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## **Desistance in action: An interactional approach to criminal justice practice and desistance from offending**

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**Abstract**

Research on the role of narrative and identity in desistance from crime tends to rely on interview methods. This article argues research and theory on desistance and interventions for addressing offending would be enriched by the qualitative analysis of interactions between criminal justice practitioners and service users. This approach is illustrated by applying discourse analysis and conversation analysis to video recordings of a groupwork programme for addressing offending behaviour. The analysis shows that: 1) service users may exhibit ambivalence to pro-social identities; 2) practitioners may orient to this resistance and encourage positive change; 3) other group members' change narratives constitute resources to support desistance. This illustrates how an interactional approach to desistance can enhance understandings of practice and change processes.

**Key words:** desistance, identity, interaction, conversation analysis, discourse analysis

## Introduction

Recent research and theory on desistance from offending suggests that shifts in identity, from “offender” to “non-offender” (or ‘secondary desistance’), may be more important for the theoretical understanding of desistance than mere absences in offending behaviour (or ‘primary desistance’) (Maruna and Farrall, 2004). Empirical research on this topic has tended to use qualitative interviews and narrative analysis (e.g., Carlsson, 2012; Gadd and Farrall, 2004; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002; King, 2013b; Maruna, 2001). Although much of this research acknowledges the importance of context for narrative, the dialogical nature of accounts and the scope for criminal justice practice to shape identities, it tends not to focus on narratives in situ (i.e., conversations outside of the research interview), to explore the role of the interviewer in co-constructing accounts or capture and analyse the way identities are produced during interactions with criminal justice practitioners. This article argues that research and theory on desistance processes – particularly identity formation / secondary desistance – could be greatly enhanced through the study of interaction in criminal justice settings. Moreover, this approach may help connect research and theory on desistance with research on effective interventions, with direct implications for criminal justice practice.

## Research on effective interventions

A substantial body of research exists on effective interventions for reducing offending, (e.g., Andrews and Bonta, 2010; McGuire, 1995), often using quantitative methods to test the relationship and impact of interventions and factors on re-offending rates. This research has been extremely important for identifying principles of effective intervention, such as matching the intensity of the intervention to the risk of re-offending, targeting those factors that are amenable to change and most closely related to offending behaviour, and using cognitive-behavioural methods that are matched to clients' preferred learning styles (Andrews and Bonta, 2010). However, research has also suggested that it is not simply the content of programmes or the selection of appropriate clients that is important, but rather the way that practitioners build and maintain working relationships with clients is an essential element for helping people 'desist' or move away from offending behaviour (e.g., Dowden and

Andrews, 2004; McNeill, Batchelor, Burnett and Knox, 2005). These key practice skills include: the demonstration of accurate empathy, respect, warmth, and therapeutic genuineness; establishing a ‘therapeutic relationship’ on mutual understanding about the nature of treatment; and the use of pro-social modelling (McNeill et al., 2005: 3).

However, very little research has explored how these skills are made manifest in interactions between criminal justice practitioners and their clients. The recent work on this topic has tended to use recordings of interactions and checklists to assess the application of certain skills. For example, Bonta, Rugge, Scott, Bourgon and Yessine (2008) assessed audiotapes of interviews between probation staff and their clients and found that the practitioners were not routinely using key skills that are known to be effective. Further research by the team showed that training increased the use of these key skills and that there was some evidence of a related impact on re-offending rates (Bonta et al., 2010). Robinson et al. (2012) reported similar findings, showing that training could increase the use of key skills and could impact on intermediate measures related to the likelihood of re-offending. Similarly, Raynor, Ugwudike and Vanstone (2014) used a checklist to identify the use of key skills used by probation staff in their sessions with criminal justice service users. This research showed a relationship between the use of skills and a reduction in re-offending rates. The checklist approach is well suited to identifying statistical relationships between skills and outcomes; however, the way in which these skills are made manifest, and how they are received by the service users, are left unexplored.

### **Research on desistance from offending**

Maruna and Farrall (2004: 174) distinguished between primary desistance – any period of non-offending – and secondary desistance – ‘the movement from the behaviour of non-offending to the assumption of a role or identity of a non-offender or “changed person”’. They argued that primary desistance is of little theoretical interest, due to the number of periods of non-offending likely in any criminal career, and that secondary desistance should be a key focus for criminological research, given that it brings attention to how people change and how they maintain abstinence from offending. A growing body of research has explored the topic of identity change, primarily drawing on qualitative interviews and narrative analysis.

For instance, Maruna (2001) interviewed 30 people deemed to be ‘desisting’ and 20 who were still involved in offending behaviour. Maruna explained that people’s narratives ‘impose an order on people’s actions and explain people’s behaviour’ and ‘act to shape and guide future behaviour’ (2001: 40). Maruna’s analysis suggested that ‘redemption scripts’ are central to the desistance process. These include aspects of fulfilment, whereby people take on ‘generative roles’ that provide a sense of meaning and achievement; exoneration, whereby someone relieves their sense of guilt or shame through helping others; legitimacy, in the sense that ex-offenders who help others to reform is an understood role in society; and therapy, as this helping role works to maintain their own efforts for reform (Maruna, 2001: 118-119). Maruna and Roy (2007) demonstrated that, rather than people “knifing off” from their past (Laub and Sampson, 2003), desistance may occur through people reformulating aspects of their past in order to create scripts for functioning in the future.

Farrall (2002) gathered research on 199 people on probation, exploring personal and social factors, and the interface between probation supervision and desistance. Farrall’s analysis suggested that it is not simply the objective changes in someone’s life that are essential for desistance, but that the subjective assessments of these changes are also important, as an investment in these aspects of their life creates a ‘stake in conformity’. Farrall (2003) highlighted that desistance seemed most closely related to changes in personal and social contexts, rather than criminal justice intervention per se, although the intervention may have been influential in some cases, such as helping people reflect on some of the aspects of their lives; it may be that the influence of criminal justice services is only evident when people look back at their pasts (Farrall, Hunter, Sharpe and Calverley, 2014).

Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002) proposed a cognitive theory of desistance that contains four key elements: 1) a general cognitive openness to change; 2) exposure and reaction to ‘hooks for change’; 3) availability of an appealing conventional self; and 4) transformation in attitudes towards deviant behaviour. They described ‘hooks for change’ as elements in a person’s environment that become catalysts for change through a person’s own creative and selective processes. That is, they are not simple ‘factors’ that have a direct impact on desistance, but rather it is the person’s understanding and engagement with these elements that make them meaningful to the person’s change processes. Within this theoretical framework,

‘hooks for change’ that include ‘blueprints’ on how to behave (e.g., what it means to be a good parent) are important for a person’s change processes, particularly if they act as a ‘gateway to conforming others’ (Giordano et al., 2002: 1056) who can role-model and reinforce pro-social behaviour. While criminal justice intervention may not provide ‘hooks for change’ in itself, it may have a role in helping encourage an openness to change, assist people’s assessment of potential hooks for change and work to provide ‘blueprints’ for future behaviour (see King, 2013a).

Building on this research, Healy’s (2010) study of Irish probationers found that those who developed a self-narrative that emphasised personal agency were more likely to desist, although factors such as social support and structural barriers (e.g., unemployment) also played an important role. In this regard, Carlsson’s (2012) Swedish study on men’s narratives critiqued the notion of ‘turning points’ (e.g., Laub and Sampson, 2003), highlighting that these narratives suggest that context and wider social structures are important in the process of change. For example, ‘homelessness’ should not be considered a turning point in itself, but rather becomes important in the context of other aspects of someone’s environment and elements in their lives. King’s (2013b) research on 20 ‘early desisters’ on probation in England demonstrated that people were reassessing their moral agency even at this early stage. It showed that changes were reliant on personal and social contexts and that the testimony of people close to them is important for reinforcing their reform efforts. Soyer’s (2014) study on young men in the juvenile justice system in USA suggested that incarceration provides the opportunity for a ‘cognitive’ turning point. However, her analysis highlighted that these shifts were primarily motivated by a desire to avoid further imprisonment, rather than encouraging the development of a new pro-social identity – that is, secondary desistance (Maruna and Farrall, 2004) – through exercising choice or accessing constructive opportunities, and that imprisonment tended to frustrate efforts to desist.

This research highlights that changes in someone’s personal and social context provides potential turning points in their offending / desistance trajectories. However, it also suggests that the way that someone understands these changes, the value they place on them, and extent to which they are able to access opportunities to take on pro-social identities, are all important in terms of turning the potential to desist into a reality. In this regard, criminal justice practice plays a role in relation to ‘assisted desistance’ (King, 2013a), such as influencing the way that people interpret aspects of

their lives, helping equip them with skills, and linking them into opportunities to engage in generative activities (McNeill, 2009). It therefore makes sense that research should explore these processes *within* criminal justice interactions, rather than restricting them to the context of research interviews.

### **Analysing interaction**

As argued by Maruna, ‘Self narratives are developed through social interaction’ (2001: 8) and are ‘explicitly contextual’ (2001: 39). It is surprising, then, that such little research has looked at desistance narratives in the context of social or criminal justice interactions. Moreover, in terms of the context in which these self narratives are produced (i.e., the research interview), although some desistance research addresses the role of the interviewer in relation to the interviewee’s account (e.g., Carlsson, 2012; Presser, 2004), often the specific role they play tends to be under-analysed or their contributions are deleted from the data extracts. As argued by Potter and Hepburn (2005), interview-based research generally pays insufficient attention to the interactional nature of interviews and that naturalistic data – i.e., data from interactions that still would have occurred without the intervention of a researcher – have a number of advantages. They also suggest that attention to the interactional aspects of interviews is crucial for understanding participants’ accounts and the functions they fulfil in the interview context.

More specifically, Potter and Hepburn (2005: 291) argued that interviews may be ‘flooded’ with ‘social science agendas and categories’. As one illustration of this effect, Carlsson (2012) highlighted how some of the desistance research on ‘turning points’ may be distorted due to specific interview questions regarding ‘turning points’ (e.g., Laub and Sampson, 2003), resulting in interviewees responding using the social science categories introduced by the researcher. Potter and Hepburn further suggested that the ‘stake’ and ‘interests’ of participants in a research interview are often obscured and will be different from other contexts, such as police interviews (Stokoe, 2013b), where, for example, a police suspect may present himself as ‘not the type of man’ who would hit a woman (Stokoe, 2010). This suggests that identity is both action-orientated and situational, in that it functions to fulfil social actions – such as blaming, justifying and criticising – while also being oriented to the specific social context and immediate interaction (McKinlay and McVittie, 2011). The production of



identities, and struggles over a sense of self, occur in specific situational contexts, while drawing on wider social and discursive resources (Dryden, Doherty and Nicolson, 2010). As argued by Korobov:

Identities are not decontextualized entities that stand outside of relational contexts. It is later, in processes of reflection and abstraction, that identities appear reified and objectified as internal phenomenon that we experience and label as private and individualized. (Korobov, 2015: 212-213).

This means that identities ought to be studied *in situ*, to understand how they function in naturalistic social contexts, and we should be wary of research approaches that risk decontextualising identities or treat them as separate from the interactions in which they are produced. Studying desistance narratives in context provides a way to open the ‘black box’ of criminal justice practice (Healy, 2010), allowing analysis of what Maruna (2001: 112) calls the ‘micromechanisms of change’ to develop a more effective ‘science of rehabilitation’. For instance, Auburn (2010) has analysed interactions in groupwork programmes for addressing sexual offending, demonstrating how ‘cognitive distortions’ can instead be understood as rhetorical devices, which show commonality with everyday ways of justifying behaviour. He argues that the analysis of interactions in such programmes has much to offer for the understanding of ‘treatment’. Waldram (2010) similarly demonstrated how so-called ‘cognitive distortions’ are embedded in broader self-narratives. Fox (1999b) has also highlighted how correctional programmes, somewhat ironically, may actually reproduce pathological identities in order to justify their own logics.

Such interactions can be analysed using discourse analysis and conversation analysis, approaches that can be used to explore interactions as they unfold (Wooffitt, 2005). Discourse analysis treats language as actively constructing reality, rather than merely reflecting a pre-existing reality, and as fulfilling a range of social functions (McKinlay and McVittie, 2008; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). It focuses on how people do things with words, including the way that identities are constructed and function in interaction. Conversation analysis is a fine-grained approach that focuses on the detail of interaction, such as turn-taking in conversations, the way that people make or receive advice, and how people produce or manage compliments and invitations (Liddicoat, 2011; ten Have, 2007). These approaches have been applied to a range of

practice contexts, including: doctor-patient interactions (Heritage and Maynard, 2005); police suspect interrogations (Stokoe and Edwards, 2008); neighbour mediation services (Stokoe, 2013a); and social work services (Hall, Juhila, Matarese and van Nijnatten, 2014). Increasing their use in the study of criminal justice practice has the potential to improve links between research on effective interventions and desistance processes.

### **An interactional approach to studying desistance**

The remainder of this article will provide an illustration of how desistance processes and criminal justice practices can be studied interactionally. The data consist of my transcripts of routine video recordings of five sessions from two cognitive-behavioural groupwork programmes run by local authority criminal justice social work services in Scotland, addressing domestic abuse and sexual offending respectively. The research was approved by the relevant ethics committee within my university and the relevant local authorities; research participants gave written consent.

The analysis draws on extracts from a session of the cognitive-behavioural groupwork programme intended to address offending behaviour among men convicted of domestic abuse. The men are required to attend the programme as part of a community sentence or post-release license following imprisonment (Macrae, 2014). The people involved have been allocated pseudonyms and identifying details have been removed or altered. The module is on Children and Fathering and focused on the men's experiences as children, the main children in their lives and their roles as fathers. The programme as a whole encourages men to ask the question 'What kind of man do I want to be?' and this module focuses on 'What kind of father do I want to be?', as the desire to become a good father is assumed to be a key motivator for the men to change (Macrae, 2014). As such, an interactional approach is suitable for exploring how these notions of identity feature within the programme.

Several previous articles on desistance focus on two case studies (e.g., Carlsson, 2012; Farrall, 2003; Gadd and Farrall, 2004; Soyer, 2014). In common with these studies, the present article includes accounts given by two individuals ('Fred' and 'Dave'); however, rather than drawing on separate interviews with two individuals, the data constitute group interaction, within which it explores how two

particular individuals discuss their personal circumstances within a groupwork session. I selected these extracts after coding all of the transcripts for instances where notions of identity appeared to be relevant, such as when the participants referred to being a good father, a partner, an ‘abuser’, or changing who they were as a person. This particular session had the highest amount of content coded in this way, so I selected three extracts for further analysis and presentation in this article, each showing different, yet related, ways in which these notions of identity feature in the interaction. The first extract shows how identity is drawn upon in ‘splitting’ good behaviour from bad, the second shows how other people in an interaction may orient to pro-social identity categories to reinforce positive change behaviour, and the third shows how identity features in an empathic telling of a change narrative. These extracts are intended to be illustrative, and no claims are made regarding their representativeness among the data set or the programme more generally.

As discussed above, this study applies discourse analysis (McKinlay and McVittie, 2008; Potter and Wetherell, 1987), which treats language as actively creating social reality and fulfilling a range of social functions, and conversation analysis (Liddicoat, 2011; ten Have, 2007), which pays attention to the fine-grained nature of interaction. Following convention, the analysis involves the presentation of extracts from the data and discussion of their elements and apparent functions.<sup>1</sup> Given that previous research has highlighted that identity change is a potentially important aspect of desistance processes (e.g., McNeill, 2006), and the description of the programme goals above, it might be expected that criminal justice social workers will engage with service users in such a way as to encourage, instil or reinforce such identity changes. The analysis focuses on how these notions of identity feature, are oriented to, and function within the interactions.

### **Analysis**

At the start of this extract, Sally (the female social worker) is standing on the left of the flipchart holding a pen while Stan (the male social worker) is seated on the right. The six men (Alec, Ben, Carl, Dave, Ed and Fred) who are on the group are seated in

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<sup>1</sup> The extracts are not transcribed to the level of detail commonly used in discourse analysis and conversation analysis (e.g., Jefferson, 2004), which does mean some of the subtleties of the interaction may be lost, but it makes the extracts more accessible for those unfamiliar with such transcription conventions.

a semicircle facing towards the flipchart. Earlier in the session, ‘Fred’ disclosed witnessing and experiencing domestic violence at the hands of his father. In this exercise, each man describes one of his children; here Fred is talking about his primary school age son (Zack), with whom he still has regular contact (unlike his older children from previous partners).

### Extract 1

- 1 Stan So how would you bring... What would you say about- How would you
- 2 describe Zack in a couple of sentences? Right, what’s Zack like? What’s he
- 3 like?
- 4 Fred Happy, eh.
- 5 Sally [Writes on the flipchart]
- 6 Fred Always cheery. Brilliant bairn<sup>2</sup> to be honest.
- 7 Stan Yep.
- 8 Fred Can’t actually believe he’s came from me, to be honest. He’s the only thing
- 9 that I’m proud of.
- 10 Stan Aye.
- 11 Fred He’s going to a good school, everything’s great basically.
- 12 Stan So there must be something good in you, Fred. If if your boy’s turning into a
- 13 nice, happy wee boy. You must be doing something right.
- 14 Fred I’m like Jekyll and Hyde. When I’m with him, totally a different person. And
- 15 when he’s not with me, I’m back to my same dickhead of a self.
- 16 Stan Yep. But always when you’re around Zack...
- 17 Fred But when I’m with Zack I’m totally like a father and...
- 18 Sally Right.
- 19 Fred Proper.
- 20 [1 second pause]
- 21 Sally You’re the dad that you want to be.
- 22 Fred Like the two things I keep separate.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Bairn’ means child or baby in the local dialect.

Since Fred describes his son in clearly positive terms – ‘happy’, ‘always cheery’, ‘brilliant bairn’ (lines 4-6) – the line ‘can’t actually believe he’s came from me to be honest’ reinforces the positive aspects of his son while suggesting that Fred’s own character is somehow negative. Similarly, saying ‘he’s the only thing that I’m proud of’ simultaneously highlights the positive nature of Fred’s son and hints at his potential role in his son’s good nature, while also implying, through the extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) ‘only thing’, that Fred’s life is otherwise absent of positive achievements. Given that Fred has suggested that he is ‘proud of’ his son, Stan picks up on this aspect to suggest that ‘there must be something good’ in Fred. While this first comment relates to Fred’s character, the subsequent comment ‘you must be doing something right’ focuses on Fred’s behaviour, highlighting its positive aspects.

Fred’s lines 14-15 are particularly interesting when considered in the light of the concept of secondary desistance (Maruna and Farrall, 2004). If this process involves a person no longer seeing themselves as an ‘offender’, then this should involve them portraying this characterisation as their main state, and positioning other harmful, deviant or illegal behaviour as being absent or aberrant. Fred makes an interesting reference to the classic novella *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson (1886/1905), which depicts a person with two distinctly different personalities, one good and one evil. Fred makes the reference more explicit by stating that around his son he is ‘totally a different person’ (line 14). Not only does Fred separate his behaviour with his son from his behaviour in other contexts, the way he phrases this ‘back to my same dickhead of a self’ suggests that his ‘immoral’ nature is his natural state, and that the positive behaviour he exhibits around his son is a departure from the norm. The references to Jekyll and Hyde and being a ‘different person’ place the focus on his inherent nature rather than his behaviours. In this way, the suggestion that Fred has ‘desisted’ from offending and taken on a new pro-social identity are resisted or avoided. When Fred draws on a potentially positive identity for himself – ‘totally like a father’ – which has implications of responsibility and caring, this is specifically related to times when he is around his son, rather than general characteristics that permeate this daily life more generally.

This analysis illustrates how practitioners may orient to the prosocial elements of service user’s accounts of their behaviour and use these to highlight the potentially

positive aspects of their character. Whereas previous research on ‘resistance’ has highlighted that service users may resist accepting stigmatised identities (Fox, 1999a; Juhila, Caswell and Raitakari, 2014), here we can see that service users may also resist positive identities and evaluations, such as being a good father, for instance by portraying their behaviour as context-dependent rather than global. Rather than seeing this in cognitive terms, here we see that Fred’s account functions discursively to manage Stan’s interpretation of his self.

The following extract relates to Fred talking about a specific episode including Zack’s mother (‘Mandy’) and her new partner, where he used a prosocial way of dealing with conflict, illustrating what Soyer (2014: 91) describes as an opportunity ‘to exercise creative agency in relation to their desired non-deviant identity’.

## Extract 2

- 1 Fred The other day, Zack told me that the guy who I thinks good, who [Mandy’s]
- 2 now with, he he he was shouting at Zack. And Zack came back and told me.
- 3 So I grabbed him and got him into the kitchen to have a word with him, eh.
- 4 And had it out with him, eh. But I done it in the right way.
- 5 Stan It was a non-violent way. [Nods]
- 6 Fred Aye, I done it in the right way. Which was to be honest... as soon as I heard it
- 7 I wanted to pummel him, eh.
- 8 Stan [Nods]
- 9 Fred But I had to think about it.
- 10 Stan [Nods, smiling]
- 11 Fred Coz he... he could’ve... The way Zack said it, it did sound worse than it was.
- 12 Stan Yep.
- 13 Sally Now how do you think Zack might have felt then if you had done that to his
- 14 step-dad?
- 15 [1 second pause]
- 16 Fred I’d not...
- 17 Sally You might have felt responsible, eh? [Nods]
- 18 Fred I’d never had talked it out and as soon as I told Mandy, she said you’ve done
- 19 the right thing.

- 20 Sally Well done.
- 21 Stan Mmm... Mmm and that's...
- 22 Dave There's another way of looking at it.
- 23 Stan Role model...
- 24 Dave Yourself, you are changing. And you should be proud o' it, instead of putting  
 25 yourself down. Know what I mean? A lot of things happen, know what I  
 26 mean? Bad things, but there is also a lot of good things happen in your life,  
 27 Fred. Know what I mean?
- 28 Fred It's like I'm still waiting on it.
- 29 Dave Oh now, they'll come.
- 30 Sally You've got them there. [Points to flipchart with list of Zack's qualities] There  
 31 it is there.
- 32 Ed Exactly. It's right there. [Nods towards flipchart]
- 33 Fred But you cannae do nothing without work. You need work tae live.

This extract begins with Fred giving an account using a clear narrative structure (Hall and Matarese, 2014): he opens by stating the time when the incident happened, describes a situation where conflict was likely to arise, talks about actions he took which could have led to a violent outcome, and provides an 'unexpected' ending whereby things were resolved peacefully. Ending this account with 'but' (line 4) implies a change from how events may have proceeded, and Stan picks up on this and adds content to the phrase 'I done it in the right way' (line 4) by saying 'it was a non-violent way'. Fred agrees with Stan's interpretation, and by stating 'to be honest [...] I wanted to pummel him' (lines 6-7), he references an inner state only knowable to the speaker and therefore difficult to refute (Edwards and Fasulo, 2006) as well as citing a 'counter disposition' (Edwards, 2005) that works to render the account as true by referencing his inclination to do the opposite. This touches on the 'heroic protection discourse' described by Dryden et al. (2010) – whereby dominant notions of masculinity assume men come to the rescue of others – and illustrates how Fred manages this by shifting from violent to non-violent means of dealing with conflict, putting across an account of his changed behaviour in line with the goals of the groupwork programme.

The social workers clearly orient to Fred's reported prosocial behaviour, reinforcing and rewarding it with nods (lines 8 and 10), smiles (line 10) and

congratulations (line 20), in line with guidelines on prosocial modelling (Trotter, 2009), as well as drawing out the potential consequences of using violence ('you might have felt responsible', line 17). In support of King's (2013b) findings, Fred references the importance of other people's testimonies – in this case, the mother of his son – in terms of reinforcing the correctness of his behaviour: 'she said you've done the right thing' (lines 18-19). This is an example of what Maruna, Lebel, Mitchell and Naples (2004) call the 'looking-glass self-concept', as the individual's changing self is reflected back to them in others' accounts. Here we see this at two levels: both in the retrospective account provided by Fred and in the moment-by-moment interaction of the groupwork session.

After this account, Stan and Dave attempt to place an interpretation on this incident. Although Stan begins with his interpretation first, which references the positive way in which this may be understood as acting as a 'role model' (line 23), Dave takes the floor to offer a fuller interpretation. He picks up on Fred's account of how his actions differed from his inclinations, suggesting that this is evidence of his changed character: 'Yourself, you are changing' (line 24). Drawing on a form of platitude, Dave emphasises that Fred's life has both good and bad elements (lines 25-27). Although Fred suggests the 'good things' have not yet occurred (line 28), Dave responds by suggesting they will inevitably occur in the future ('Oh now, they'll come', line 29), while Sally and Ed make use of the written positive qualities of Fred's son to suggest that they are already present. In this way, the social workers and group members can be seen to work collaboratively, using Fred's own account as a resource to evidence and reinforce his improved self and positive role as a father. However, responding with 'but' (line 33), Fred can be seen to be resisting the interpretations offered by the others (Juhila et al., 2014), using an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) to portray employment in a way that construes all else as lacking meaning: 'you cannae do nothing without work. You need work tae live' (line 33). The next and final extract demonstrates a different response from Fred and illustrates how other group members can make use of their own change narratives.

### **Extract 3**



1     Dave    See what I think Fred, you're too hard on yourself pal. [Shakes head] You are.  
2     Ben     You are a bit, like.  
3     Stan     I've been telling him for that for months.  
4     Fred     [Begins crying silently and covers eyes with hand]  
5     Dave     Nah, he is. I mean you seen it the last time. I mean, I can't remember the  
6             Polish one, and what he says it was the truth as well. And he couldnae trust  
7             hiself.  
8     Stan     Yeah. [Nods]  
9     Dave     Know what I mean? What I mean, the boy's sitting there, doing so well, and  
10            he's not getting from the partner back what he should do.  
11    Ed       Mmm. [Nods]  
12    Dave     Know what I mean? And it's...  
13    Sally     [Touches Fred on arm]  
14    Dave     It's nae shame ya crying either, know what I mean?  
15    Stan     Nah, no, no.  
16    Carl     Of course it's not.  
17    Dave     That's what eh, what's his name? Who done it as well.  
18    Stan     Aye, the big fellah, aye. [Nods]  
19    Dave     I mean, I wish that I could have done it years ago and I wouldnae be sitting  
20            here.  
21            [1 second pause]  
22    Dave     Opened up.  
23    Stan     And I think, I think... I think some... I think some people cry on, a bit like  
24            Fred here, I think it's not an unhappy thing it's... thing it's...  
25    Dave     It's relief.  
26    Stan     You can get the compassion you can get from a group like this.  
27    Dave     It's relief and trust.  
28    Stan     [Nods]  
29    Dave     Know what I mean?  
30            [2.5 second pause]  
31    Dave     I mean, that's what I'm trying to say to him. I wish that I got that...  
32            [1 second pause]  
33    Dave     ...twenty year ago and I wouldn't be sitting here.

34 Fred [Removes hand from eyes, looks down]  
 35 Stan Yep. [Nods]  
 36 Dave Know what I mean?  
 37 Stan Yep.  
 38 [1.5 second pause]  
 39 Dave It's a shame people have to go through that.  
 40 Stan Mm-hmm.  
 41 Dave To get to a stage where we are now.  
 42 Stan Sure.  
 43 Dave We do reach a better place and feel better for yourself.  
 44 Sally Mmm. [Nods]  
 45 Ed [Nods]  
 46 Dave I mean, you knew the first time when I started, I couldnae care a- about  
 47 women, anything.  
 48 Sally [Nods]  
 49 Dave But now I've, even with the police...  
 50 Fred [Wipes tears from cheek]  
 51 Dave I couldnae c- care I mean... I used to go and pick fights with them. Now I'm  
 52 seeing respect back from them, coz they're get it back from me. They actually  
 53 know about where this is coming on as well.  
 54 Stan Mm-hmm.  
 55 Dave Do ya know what I mean? And everything's everything's turning around  
 56 and...  
 57 Fred [Puts hand to mouth in fist shape]  
 58 Dave It's making me be a different person, a person I wanna be. And I'm getting it  
 59 back from my daughters, know what I mean? And they're seeing it.  
 60 Sally [Nods]  
 61 Dave There's a lot of things I would do different, know what I mean?  
 62 [1 second pause]  
 63 Dave Stupidity and anger. We all learn by our mistakes and that's what we're here  
 64 for.  
 65 Sally You're all here... That is why you're here. You've signed up to this. You've  
 66 got one chance at this. [Looks around group members]

- 67 [2 second pause]  
 68 Sally One chance. To really look at your behaviour and really look at where you  
 69 want to go, and the man and the dad... the partner you want to be. So that  
 70 this. [Shrugs, shakes head] Doesnae happen again.

This extract begins with Dave saying to Fred, ‘you’re too hard on yourself pal’ (line 1), implying that he is not as bad as the account he produces of himself, although this evaluation is softened with ‘See what I think’, which renders it as a personal view that maintains Fred’s privileged position to judge himself (Hepburn and Potter, 2007). This interpretation is reinforced by Dave stating ‘You are’ (lines 1), Ben stating ‘You are a bit, like’ (line 2), and Stan saying that he has been telling Fred this for months (line 3). At line 4, Fred covers his eyes and begins to cry; we know he is crying because this is picked up on by the others in the interaction (line 14 and following). Crying in interaction is difficult to interpret; Ladegaard (2014: 23) suggests that it can indicate someone dealing with unaddressed trauma, allowing them to feel ‘self-sympathy’, a sign that they feel safe in the group interaction and as a process of catharsis. In the current analysis, it can be compared with several of Fred’s responses to people’s evaluations in the previous extracts, where he tended to resist or deflect them to some extent, whereas here such resistance is not evident. Ladagaard also suggests crying may signify a process of change, a recognition of loss. Farrall (2005) suggests moving from one identity to another entails existential threat / ontological insecurity, which may engender feelings of shame about one’s self while also compelling one to change. McKendy (2006) suggests people can feel overwhelmed by shame, which may manifest as anger. In relation to the groupwork programme, Macrae (2014) states that shame is an inherent part of the change process. Although speculative, here the crying may signify Fred letting go of a narrative regarding his past trauma and the related view of himself as bad, and a move towards an acceptance of some positivity and agency.

Hepburn and Potter (2007) identified that one response to crying is to normalise it. We see this from line 14 when Dave states ‘It’s nae shame ya crying either’, and speaks about another person (‘the big fellah’, line 18) who also cried, which works to normalise it in a way that also orients to assumptions that crying is not masculine. Interestingly, Dave and Stan topicalise the crying and offer interpretations, both construing it in relatively positive terms, with Dave suggesting that it is

something desirable in the sense that he wished that he ‘could have done it years ago’ (line 19) and indicates ‘relief and trust’ (lines 25-27) while Stan suggests it is ‘not an unhappy thing’ and relates to the ‘compassion you can get from a group like this’ (lines 24-26). Sally demonstrates a form of non-verbal sympathy by touching Fred’s arm (line 13). These responses work to portray Fred’s crying as acceptable.

Ruusuvuori (2005) suggests that one way of demonstrating empathy, a potential response to crying (Hepburn and Potter, 2007), is to tell a ‘second story’ that relates to the central person’s own experiences and illustrates a sense of mutual understanding. Dave takes this approach, with the references to other men who have cried or been in a similar situation to Fred (lines 5-7, 17) before relating a story about his own change process, started at lines 19-20 and picked up again from line 31. Here he connects the process of crying and having ‘opened up’ (line 22) with an avoidance of offending behaviour through the euphemism: ‘I wouldnae be sitting here’. Using the indefinite pronoun ‘people’ (line 39) then switching to the personal pronoun ‘we’ (lines 41-43), Dave emphasises the inevitability as well as the constructive nature of the difficult process of change, while allowing Fred to recognise himself in this account (Ruusuvuori, 2005).

Dave then provides a personal narrative regarding his process of change, moving from not caring about ‘women, anything’ and ‘pick[ing] fights with’ the police, to getting respect back from the police and his daughters seeing his changed nature (lines 46-59). Given the implications of the category ‘police’, stating that he has gone from picking fights with them to getting respect from them works to convey his move from an ‘offender’ to ‘non-offender’ identity. His account relates to the notion of identity change inherent in ‘secondary desistance’ (Maruna and Farrall, 2004), as he states ‘it’s making me a different person’, including having this reflected back to him by important others (King, 2013b), in this case his daughters (lines 58-59). As identified by Maruna (2001), negative elements from the past are reworked to make them positive: ‘we all learn by our mistakes’ (line 63). Dave ends by connecting his account with their presence on the groupwork programme – ‘that’s what we’re here for’ (lines 63-64) – at which point Sally enters and emphasises how their presence is both a signifier of their commitment to change and the means by which they can achieve personal change. Here she draws on the potential prosocial roles they can play – ‘the man and the dad... the partner’ (lines 65-70) – moving from Dave’s account back to the purpose of the groupwork programme (see Macrae, 2014) and the

futures that all of the group members could achieve. In this way, the social workers and group members have collectively accepted and normalised the group member's crying, linked it to the desistance process, demonstrated empathy and understanding, and connected it with the broader change goals of the criminal justice intervention.

## Discussion

This analysis has demonstrated that notions relevant to desistance, particularly concepts of identity change relevant to 'secondary desistance' (Maruna and Farrall, 2004), are evident in interactions in criminal justice settings and can be analysed in ways that help to bridge the gap between desistance research and research on effective interventions. As highlighted by Carlsson (2012: 2), using interview methods often means you 'get what you ask for', implying that some of the conclusions about change processes inherent in desistance narratives may be artefacts of the research method. This article shows how applying discourse analysis (McKinlay and McVittie, 2008; Potter and Wetherell, 1987) and conversation analysis (Liddicoat, 2001; ten Have, 2007) allows the exploration of interaction in ways that highlight the subtleties of criminal justice practice and show desistance processes in action in naturalistic settings.

Addressing points raised by McNeill, Bracken and Clarke (2009) regarding the value of naturalistic qualitative research, this approach shows how practice can orient to individual change processes within a group intervention and focuses attention on how such interventions work. It shows how criminal justice service users may demonstrate ambivalence and resistance to taking on prosocial identities; practitioners orient to this and work to reinforce prosocial behaviour; and other group members provide 'second stories' (Ruusuvuori, 2005) that recount their own change processes, which act as resources to support the change efforts of others. Rather than treating desistance as involving an 'internal narrative' (Vaughan, 2007), here we can see the external manifestation of such narratives, as well as the processes by which they are shaped and negotiated. In this sense, we can understand criminal justice interventions as involving the 're-storying' (McNeill, 2004: 39) of someone's life, ideally moving from a story of crime and hurt to one of hope and redemption (Maruna, 2001). In this regard, we can see how language functions argumentatively (Billig, 1996) to portray certain people, behaviours or material goods as being

important or moral. This approach can examine the role of agency, often under-theorised in desistance research (Healy, 2013), while acknowledging the extent to which such accounts are bound within certain contexts and wider structures (McKendy, 2006). As suggested by Auburn and Lea (2003: 298), one purpose of criminal justice interventions is ‘orienting to and arguing over’ the positions available to those with a history of offending, and an interactional approach may provide a better understanding of such interventions, for both service users and practitioners (Auburn, 2005).

Although this research focuses on talk and interaction, this is not to suggest that talk is the only important aspect of desistance. The group members’ references to a lack of employment or difficulties regarding contact with their children highlight that these are real social issues that are unlikely to be resolved within the confines of a groupwork programme and instead relate to personal and family dynamics as well as broader structural factors (Lynch, 2014). While prosocial identities such as ‘good father’, ‘caring partner’ or ‘worker’ are potentially available generative roles (Presser, 2004), they are also precarious for these men. However, criminal justice interventions are contexts in which people may gain skills for addressing these issues and be connected with opportunities, as well as constituting forums in which they make sense of these factors in terms of their sense of self and their future behaviour. This is the way that interventions may work on both the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ aspects of the issues in someone’s life (Farrall, 2002), so that they can overcome barriers to desistance and prosocial opportunities may be turned into ‘hooks for change’ (Giordano et al., 2002).

This article is intended to be illustrative, and further systematic research on interaction in criminal justice settings has the potential to be more conclusive regarding the role of particular practice skills and their relationships with desistance processes, as well as provide the detailed description of practitioner skills in action that is often absent from the literature (Trotter, 2013). It is important to be clear that I am making no claims about the effectiveness of groupwork programmes based on the present analysis. Research suggests that cognitive behavioural programmes can reduce offending behaviour (Lipsey, Landenberger and Wilson, 2007), although the evidence on programmes for addressing domestic abuse is more mixed (Miller, Drake and Nafziger, 2013), and some have critiqued the scope of such programmes to address the structural issues that affect desistance (Healy, 2012). Rather, I am

advocating a research approach that may deepen our understanding of such programmes and practices. As argued by King (2013b: 162): ‘Future research should examine in greater detail the impact that practitioners can have upon the narrative-building process, and the implications of this for more sustained desistance.’ This approach can explore the subtleties of human interaction, including body language and movement (e.g., MacMartin and LeBaron, 2006). This could greatly enhance research intended to explore the role of criminal justice practitioners in shaping desistance narratives, moving beyond the limits of interview data (e.g., Digard, 2014). It could complement quantitative research on intervention outcomes, increasing the understanding of practice while producing specific examples that could assist with training and reflection on practice. A greater focus on interaction can open the ‘black box’ of criminal justice services and increases the ecological validity of research with the potential to enrich both theoretical understandings of desistance and learning about effective practices.

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